



PASSAGES TO HISTORY: UNDERSTANDING AYYAPPA PANIKER'S PASSAGE TO AMERICA AS A LOCUS OF EAST-WEST DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

In Ayyappa Paniker's thought-provoking poem, "Passage to America," the poet offers a critical response to Walt Whitman's celebrated work, "Passage to India." As an influential figure in ushering modernism into Malayalam poetry, Paniker's poem reflects the aftermath of living in a country plagued by repeated histories of failures and betrayals. Through seven distinct sections, Paniker explores the tensions between America's technological advancements and its loss of humanity and soul. With a keen eye for imagery and striking metaphors, Paniker delves into themes such as the ravages of war, cultural fusion, futile superiority, lunar exploration, and the longing for a non-materialistic civilization. This essay examines the nuances and underlying critiques in "Passage to America," shedding light on Paniker's poignant commentary on America's societal and moral implications during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

KEYWORDS: Colonial history, critique of materialism

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INTRODUCTION

Ayyappa Paniker seems to have ushered in modernism in Malayalam poetry through the publication of *Kurukshetram*. His poems reflect the after effects of living in a country beset with repeated histories of failures and betrayals. And the self, caught in this vortex cannot bare the soul to the world using no conventional poetical forms. As Jayanta Mahapatra says, "he cannot lie to himself, ever." This essay is about a single, but rather long-ish poem called *Passage to America*.

K. Satchidanandan says in an afterword to a collection of Ayyappa Paniker's poetry says that he had been "productively alive to the variety of forms and patterns of poetry that range from short to confessional fragments, hymns, lullabies and epitaphs to long revealing sequences, dramatic monologues and classical ballets." (187) Beyond this staggering oeuvre, he had also been an innovator of strikingly original metrical forms.

This poem is divided into seven sections and while they seem disconnected with each other, one can conjecture a theme, a response to what may be called the remnants of colonial history in the western civilization. The poem was written when Ayyappa Paniker was in Indiana University working for his doctoral degree under Samuel Yellen. He says about the time,

I was in Bloomington, Indiana from 1969 to 1971, doing my Ph.D. at Indiana University, taking Poetry with Samuel Yellen. I was perhaps writing simultaneously in Malayalam, my mother tongue, and in English, my second language. In the early days it wasn't quite easy to get used to the new surroundings and to make friends with Americans. Not quite the culture shock they speak about. It was the sixties culture and campus atmosphere. Eventually I did make many fast friends. (Kumar 160)

His poem can be seen as a response to Walt Whitman's poem "Passage to India" which extols the virtue of the technological and scientific advancement of America. Whitman also shows that all the latest innovations and new means of transport has connected America to the rest of the world. The connection to India is a spiritual connection which adds to the physical progress that America has already made. Whitman's poem assumes two positions:

1. America represents the height of the human civilization. The technological advancements and new transport pathways connect America to the rest of the world. The connection brings India, the land of spirituality to America and helps America to become both scientifically and spiritually the centre of civilization today.
2. He views Columbus's 'discovery' of America as an unproblematic issue. He does not see colonialism, he sees the discovery as the advancement of human progress.

We can see Ayyappa Paniker's "Passage to America" as a response to Whitman's poem *Ayappa Paniker* uses issues relevant to the year in which he writes (1969-70) and how America became a hegemonic nation which tried to rule the world. The nation was becoming technologically advanced but Ayyappa Paniker says it has lost its heart, its humanity, its soul.

1969-1971

In order to comprehend the underlying context of the poem, it is imperative to consider the historical backdrop in which it was written, specifically during the late 1960s. In 1968, the Paris revolution took place, characterized by widespread student protests against the government and the emergence of countercultural movements such as the hippie movement, embracing concepts of free love, drug use, and a bohemian lifestyle. Concurrently, individuals turned to Eastern spirituality as a response to the perceived materialistic nature of their own country. Notably, prominent Beat generation poets like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder shifted their focus from a spiritually bereft America to India. During this period, America witnessed advancements in high technology, exemplified by the historic moon landing in 1969, representing a new frontier of human achievement. However, America was also entangled in a contentious and seemingly futile war in Vietnam, which garnered criticism both domestically and internationally. Additionally, the PL480 (refers to Public Law 480, also known as the Food for Peace program. It is a United States federal law that provides for the donation or sale of agricultural commodities to foreign countries) emerged as a food-aid program, introducing advanced crop varieties to alleviate hunger in impoverished nations like India. Consequently, within the poem, the interactions between America and the wider world, including its relationship with India, can be explored through this lens. Whitman's "Passage to India" says how America sees the world Ayyappa Paniker's *Passage to America* replies how the world sees America.

The Poem

This poem is divided into seven sub-sections.

1. Perunnaal (Feast, Festival Day)
Instead of festivity there is only death imagery. The festival and is Christmas and New Year. All around as are images of death. This could be the ravages of Vietnam War. America caused much destruction and many innocent people were killed in Vietnam. And all in T.V. and medias you here the reports of death. May be it is the time we talk about the life rather than death. But when so many people die, all around you, is it okay to speak about life? More than death, to be alive is more frightening these days. Satchidanandan says that there is much more here:

"[...] death in the poem is much more than a tele-viewing of the Vietnam deaths; it is symptomatic of the decadence that fills the fragmentary life of affluent America."

The poet however doesn't want to escape from the realities into the 'cold comfort of death' either.

2. My Sitar, My Guitar
A sexual act is depicted. The meaning of East(sitar) and West(guitar). In the sexual union, irrespective of their differences, they rise above their differences in their religion(steeple, spire, dome)and culture(pyramid)and rise to the sky, touch the stars and after orgasm, falls to earth, it is the music of coming together in spite of differences, it is the true music of love.

3. Rosayathedi (searching for rose)
It's a futile search Americans think they are superior and wants to reform other people. They forget that other people have their own dreams, goals, lives. Americans are living in a bed of roses (a luxurious life) and they want to imagine that other people need their help.
4. Rajathasundhari (Silver Belle)
The moon is described as a silver bell whose virginity is broken by man's exploration of moon (moon landing in 1969) here man is seen as a lover raping his beloved and even though it is painful (having sex with her), she longs for it. Here Ayyappa Paniker seems to appreciate man's exploration of the moon.
5. Poetry Reading
This section is dedicated to Gary Snyder who is a Beat poet who tried to see the east and the non-materialistic tradition of India to help America to cure from its materialistic, spiritually empty civilization. Snyder is a poet who is like a sage tries to talk about a new civilization that is not materialistic. Snyder used Sanskrit mantras in his poetry ("sutras") while listening to Snyder's words in his bed with his beloved, the narrator is distracted by his beloved's body. A dog listens to the poetry better and responds better. The narrator is said that the dog understands things better than him.
6. Taking Leave
After spending the night, the lovers are saying farewell to each other. How to take leave of each other? Should it be a romantic good-bye? May be it is better to do something unromantic and brutal and hurt and that will make the other person remember you more.
7. America
The passage to India can also be a Passage to America. Like a palmist looking at a hand, poet is looking at your map and what does he see? He sees the lifeline and headline but poet doesn't see the heart line in the map of America poet asks that whether the heart line disappears because of the constant bombings in the land. Here the poet remembers his own country, India. He looks at the Phalgun river which is now dry because of drought. This was the same river where Buddha became enlightened but when the poet looks at the map of America he sees nothing but confusion because all the nuclear explosions have made the land unrecognizable.

There is no heart line (a term in palmistry) in America. It does not have a heart. All it produces is material wealth. They make advanced crops that is to be sold to the poor countries and make the latest colour televisions to entertain people, and T.N.T (explosives) to kill people. "Our heart is empty and our head is filled with destruction" It is Christmas, the birthday of Christ. They don't have a sacred heart, but they have made a shape of heart and pinned it on a cross on the top of a hill, which is the hill of the material progress. They don't have any feelings and all they have is their own scientific and material progress.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ayyappa Paniker's poem "Passage to America" serves as a response to Walt Whitman's "Passage to India," reflecting the remnants of colonial history in Western civilization. Divided into seven sections, the poem explores the aftermath of living in a country marked by failures and betrayals. Paniker criticizes America's technological advancements and hegemonic aspirations, emphasizing its loss of humanity and soul. Through vivid imagery and thought-provoking metaphors, Paniker highlights the decaying nature of affluent America, the futile search for superiority, the exploration of the moon, and the longing for a non-materialistic civilization. Ultimately, the poet questions America's lack of a heart and its relentless pursuit of material wealth, contrasting it with the spiritual and cultural richness of India. "Passage to America" serves as a profound commentary on the societal and moral implications of America's progress during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Publication History

The poem, though written originally in Malayalam, had the title (transliterated in Malayalam) "Passage to America" in Malayalam too. It has been republished in parts, in many collections, but rarely in complete form. The original Malayalam poem had the subheadings, while the English translation which appears online and translated by the author himself with the help of J.O. Perry, Dakshinamoorthy, K. Satchidanandan, and Esther Y. Smith doesn't. The online version, which is popular among students has many typos and seems to be a corrupted form reproduced from the Many Mountains Moving journal published by the University of Colorado. Some passages appeared in Malayalam Poetry Today: An Anthology of Malayalam Poems Rendered Into English edited by K.M. Tharakan, a collection of Malayalam poems translated into English and published by Sahitya Akademi in 1984.

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